

# André Breton

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**André Breton** (19 February 1896 – 28 September 1966) was a French writer, poet and theorist of Surrealism. He is known best as the founder of the Surrealist art movement. He wrote the first Surrealist Manifesto the 'Manifeste du Surréalisme' of 1924.



photo of André Breton and his quote, in 1924: 'I could spend my whole life prying loose the secrets of the insane. These people are honest to a fault, and their naivety has no peer but my own'

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## Quotes of André Breton

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### Quotes, 1920's

- *La beauté sera CONVULSIVE ou ne sera pas.*
- Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or not at all.
  - Quote from Breton's novel *Nadja* (1928), final sentence
- Pure psychic automatism, by which one seeks to express, be it verbally in writing, or in any other manner (is) the real working of the mind. Dictated by the unconsciousness, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, and free from aesthetic or moral preoccupations.
  - Quote from 'Manifesto du Surréalisme', André Breton, Paris, Editions KRA, 1929
- I was asked to make a report on the Italian situation to this special committee of the 'gas cell', which made it clear to me that I was to stick to the statistical facts (steel production etc.) and above all not to get involved with ideology I couldn't do it.
  - Quote of André Breton, from his *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* 1930; as quoted in *Manifestos of Surrealism* trans. by Richard Seaver and Helen Lane; Ann Arbor 1972, p. 143
  - Breton was unable to join a worker's cell in Paris as part of his induction into the French Communist Party as he admitted in 1929
- [T]his cancer of the mind which consists of thinking all too sadly that certain things 'are' while others, which well might be, 'are not'.
  - Quote from *Deuxième Manifeste du Surréalisme* Andre Breton (Second Manifesto of Surrealism; 1930)



photo of André Breton, 1950's

# Le Manifeste du Surréalisme, Andre Breton (Manifesto of Surrealism; 1924)

Quotes from the *First Manifesto of Surrealism* - 1924; in *The Abridged Dictionary of Surrealism*, reprinted in Marguerite Bonnet, ed. (1988). *Oeuvres complètes*, 1:328. Paris: Éditions Gallimard

- Children set off each day without a worry in the world. Everything is near at hand; the worst material conditions are fine. The woods are white or black, one will never sleep.
  - Quote of Breton, from the Introduction of his 'Manifesto du Surréalisme', Andre Breton, 1924
- So strong is the belief in life, in what is most fragile in life — real life, I mean — that in the end this belief is lost. Man, that inveterate dreamer daily more discontent with his destiny has trouble assessing the objects he has been led to use, objects that his nonchalance has brought his way, or that he has earned through his own efforts, almost always through his own efforts, for he has agreed to work, at least he has not refused to try his luck (or what he calls his luck!). At this point he feels extremely modest: he knows what women he has had, what silly affairs he has been involved in; he is unimpressed by his wealth or his poverty in this respect he is still a new-born babe and, as for the approval of his conscience, I confess that he does very nicely without it. If he still retains a certain lucidity all he can do is turn back toward his childhood which, however his guides and mentors may have botched it, still strikes him as somehow charming. There, the absence of any known restrictions allows him the perspective of several lives lived at once; this illusion becomes firmly rooted within him; now he is only interested in the fleeting, the extreme facility of everything.
  - the first lines in 'Manifesto du Surréalisme', Andre Breton, 1924
- But it is true that we would not dare venture so far it is not merely a question of distance. Threat is piled upon threat, one yields, abandons a portion of the terrain to be conquered. This imagination which knows no bounds is henceforth allowed to be exercised only in strict accordance with the laws of an arbitrary utility; it is incapable of assuming this inferior role for very long and, in the vicinity of the twentieth year generally prefers to abandon man to his lusterless fate.
- Beloved imagination, what I most like in you is your unsparing quality There remains madness, 'the madness that one locks up', as it has aptly been described. That madness or another.
- We all know, in fact, that the insane....derive a great deal of comfort and consolation from their imagination, that they enjoy their madness sufficiently to endure the thought that its validity does not extend beyond themselves. And, indeed, hallucinations, illusions, etc., are not a source of trifling pleasure... These people are honest to a fault, and their 'naïveté' has no peer but my own. Christopher Columbus should have set out to discover America with a boatload of madmen. And note how this madness has taken shape, and endured.
- It is not the fear of madness which will oblige us to leave the flag of imagination furled.
- We are still living under the reign of logic: this of course, is what I have been driving at. But in this day and age logical methods are applicable only to solving problems of secondary interest. The absolute rationalism that is still in vogue allows us to consider only facts relating directly to our experience. Logical ends, on the contrary escape us. It is pointless to add that experience itself has found itself increasingly circumscribed. It paces back and forth in a cage from which it is more and more difficult to make it emerge. It too leans for support on what is most immediately expedient, and it is protected by the sentinels of common sense.



Summary, Feb. 1919 - of the first issue of the magazine 'Littérature', directeurs: Louis Aragon, André Breton and Philippe Soupault, published in Paris



photo, 1920, of André Breton at the Dada festival in Paris; bearing a sign designed by Surrealist Francis Picabia

- I could spend my whole life prying loose the secrets of the insane. These people are honest to a fault, and their naivety has no peer but my own.
- Surrealism will usher you into death, which is a secret society. It will glove your hand, burying therein the profound M with which the word Memory begins. Do not forget to make proper arrangements for your last will and testament: speaking personally I ask that I be taken to the cemetery in a moving van. May my friends destroy every last copy of the printing of the Speech concerning the Modicum of Reality
- If the depths of our mind contain within it strange forces capable of augmenting those on the surface, or of waging a victorious battle against them, there is every reason to seize them - first to seize them, then, if need be, to submit them to the control of our reason. The analysts themselves have everything to gain by it. But it is worth noting that no means has been designated a priori for carrying out this undertaking, that until further notice it can be construed to be the province of poets as well as scholars, and that its success is not dependent upon the more or less capricious paths that will be followed.
- Freud very rightly brought his critical faculties to bear upon the dream. It is, in fact, inadmissible that this considerable portion of psychic activity (since, at least from man's birth until his death, thought offers no solution of continuity the sum of the moments of the dream, from the point of view of time, and taking into consideration only the time of pure dreaming, that is the dreams of sleep, is not inferior to the sum of the moments of reality or, to be more precisely limiting, the moments of waking) has still today been so grossly neglected.
- I have always been amazed at the way an ordinary observer lends so much more credence and attaches so much more importance to waking events than to those occurring in dreams. It is because man, when he ceases to sleep, is above all the plaything of his memory and in its normal state memory takes pleasure in weakly retracing for him the circumstances of the dream, in stripping it of any real importance, and in dismissing the only determinant from the point where he thinks he has left it a few hours before: this firm hope, this concern. He is under the impression of continuing something that is worthwhile. Thus the dream finds itself reduced to a mere parenthesis, as is the night. And, like the night, dreams generally contribute little to furthering our understanding. This curious state of affairs seems to me to call for certain reflections.
- Why should I not expect from the sign of the dream more than I expect from a degree of consciousness which is daily more acute? Can't the dream also be used in solving the fundamental questions of life? Are these questions the same in one case as in the other and, in the dream, do these questions already exist? Is the dream any less restrictive or punitive than the rest? I am growing old and, more than that reality to which I believe I subject myself, it is perhaps the dream, the difference with which I treat the dream, which makes me grow old.
- Let me come back again to the waking state. I have no choice but to consider it a phenomenon of interference. Not only does the mind display in this state, a strange tendency to lose its bearings (as evidenced by the slips and mistakes the secrets of which are just beginning to be revealed to us), but, what is more, it does not appear that, when the mind is functioning normally it really responds to anything but the suggestions which come to it from the depths of that dark night to which I commend it.
- The mind of the man who dreams is fully satisfied by what happens to him. The agonizing question of possibility is no longer pertinent. Kill, fly faster, love to your heart's content. And if you should die, are you not certain of re-awaking among the dead? Let yourself be carried along, events will not tolerate your interference. They are nameless. The ease of everything is priceless.
- What reason, I ask, a reason so much vaster than the other makes dreams seem so natural and allows me to welcome unreservedly a welter of episodes so strange that they could confound me now as I write? And yet I can believe my eyes, my ears; this great day has arrived, this beast has spoken.
- Surrealist methods would, moreover, demand to be heard. Everything is valid when it comes to obtaining the desired suddenness from certain associations. The pieces of paper that Picasso and Braque (in this quote Breton refers to the early collage art of the two Cubists, ed.) insert into their work have the same value as the introduction of a



photo, May 1921, of the Opening of the Max Ernst exhibition at the gallery Au Sans Pareil; Philippe Soupault on top of the ladder with a bicycle under his arm, Jacques Rigaut (upside down), André Breton and Simone Kahn



one of the few editions, 1926, of 'La Revolution Surrealiste', including poems of André Breton

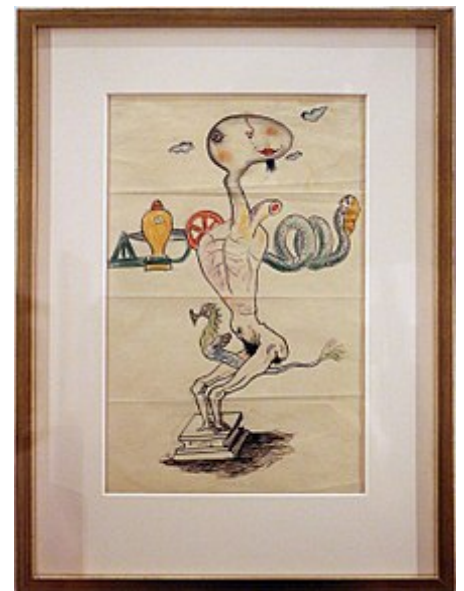


platitude into a literary analysis of the most rigorous sort. It is even permissible to entitle POEM what we get from the most random assemblage possible (observe, if you will, the syntax) of headlines and scraps of headlines cut out of the newspapers.

- A story is told according to which Saint-Pol-Roux, in times gone by used to have a notice posted on the door of his manor house in Camaret, every evening before he went to sleep, which read: 'THE POET IS WORKING'.
- In those days, a man at least as boring as Pierre Reverdy, was writing: 'The image is a pure creation of the mind. It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities. The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be – the greater its emotional power and poetic reality.' (in the 'Nord-Sud', March 1918). These words, however sibylline for the uninitiated, were extremely revealing, and I pondered them for a long time.
- Apollinaire asserted that Chirico's first paintings were done under the influence of kinesthetic disorders (migraines, colic, etc.)
- In homage to Guillaume Apollinaire [famous French poet, art-critic, writer and defender of Cubism], who had just died and who, on several occasions, seemed to us to have followed a discipline of this kind, without however having sacrificed to it any mediocre literary means, Soupault and I baptized the new mode of pure expression which we had at our disposal and which we wished to pass on to our friends, by the name of SURREALISM. I believe that there is no point today in dwelling any further on this word and that the meaning we gave it initially has generally prevailed over its Apollinarian sense.
  - Breton's quote refers to the start of the term Surrealism, together with Philippe Soupault
- Those who might dispute our right to employ the term SURREALISM in the very special sense that we understand it are being extremely dishonest, for there can be no doubt that this word had no currency before we came along. Therefore, I am defining it once and for all: SURREALISM, Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.
- After you have settled yourself in a place as favorable as possible to the concentration of your mind upon itself, have writing materials brought to you. Put yourself in as passive, or receptive, a state of mind as you can. Forget about your genius, your talents, and the talents of everyone else. Keep reminding yourself that literature is one of the saddest roads that lead to everything. Write quickly, without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what you're writing and be tempted to reread what you have written. The first sentence will come spontaneously so compelling is the truth that with every passing second there is a sentence unknown to our consciousness which is only crying out to be heard.
- Surrealism will usher you into death, which is a secret society. It will glove your hand, burying therein the profound Memory with which the word Memory begins. Do not forget to make proper arrangements for your last will and testament: speaking personally I ask that I be taken to the cemetery in a moving van. May my friends destroy every last copy of the printing of the Speech concerning the Modicum of Reality
- Surrealism, such as I conceive of it, asserts our complete nonconformism clearly enough so that there can be no question of translating it, at the trial of the real world, as evidence for the defense. It could, on the contrary, only serve to justify the complete state of distraction which we hope to achieve here below. Kant's absentmindedness regarding women, Pasteur's absentmindedness about 'grapes', Curie's absentmindedness with respect to vehicles, are in this regard profoundly symptomatic. This world is only very relatively in tune with thought, and incidents of this kind are only the most obvious episodes of a war in which I am proud to be participating. 'Ce monde n'est que très relativement à la mesure de la pensée et les incidents de ce genre ne sont que les épisodes jusqu'ici les plus marquants d'une guerre d'indépendance à laquelle je me fais gloire de participer. Surrealism is the 'invisible ray' which will one day enable us to win out over our opponents. 'You are no longer trembling, carcass'. This summer the roses are blue; the wood is of glass. The earth, draped in its verdant cloak, makes as little impression upon me as a



drawing, 1926 in the novel 'Nadja', by André Breton; Gallimard, Paris 1928, Dessin de Nadja



collective art-work, 1928: 'Cadavre exquis', created by André Breton, Yves Tanguy, Man Ray, Max Morise

ghost. It is living and ceasing to live which are imaginary solutions. Existence is elsewhere.

- The last sentences of the Surrealist Manifesto, 1924

## Le Surréalisme et la Peinture (1926) Andre Breton

Quotes of André Breton from: *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture* (1926) (Surrealism and Painting); first publication, 1928; new publication, Gallimard, 2002

- *L'amour est toujours devant vous. Aimez.*
  - Love is always before you. Love it.
- *L'œil existe à l'état sauvage.*
  - Eyes exist in the savage state.

## Quotes, after 1930

- *Les valeurs oniriques l'ont définitivement emporté sur les autres et je demande à ce qu'on tienne pour un crétin celui qui se refuserait encore, par exemple, à voir un cheval galoper sur une tomate. Une tomate est aussi un ballon d'enfant, le surréalisme, je le répète, ayant supprimé le mot comme.* [1]
- Oneiric values have definitely won out over the others, and I maintain that anyone who still refuses to see, for instance, a horse galloping on a tomato, must be an idiot. A tomato is also a child's balloon Surrealism, again, having suppressed the word "like." [2]
  - quote from: *Point du Jour* (Break of Day; 1934)
  - Breton's quote is often misquoted as *The man who can't visualize a horse galloping on a tomato is an idiot.*
- Surrealism is only trying to rejoin the most durable traditions of mankind. Among the primitive peoples art always goes beyond what is conventionally and arbitrarily called the 'real'. The natives of the Northwest Pacific coast, the Pueblos, New Guinea, New Ireland, the Marquesas, among others, have made 'objets' [in the Collections of Max Ernst, C. Levy-Strauss, Andre Breton, Pierre Matisse, Carlbach, Segredakis] which Surrealists particularly appreciate.
  - Quote of 1942, in the introduction of the Catalog 'First papers of surrealism: hanging by André Breton, his twine Marcel Duchamp'; exhibition at the Coordinating Council of French Relief Societies, Inc., New York, Oct. 14-Nov 7, 1942
- I say that the eye is not open when it is limited to the passive role of a mirror – even if the water of that mirror offers some interesting peculiarities....that eye impresses me as no less dead than the eye of a slaughtered steer if it has only the capacity to reflect – what if it reflects the object in one or in many aspects, in repose or in motion, in waking or in dream? The treasure of the eye is elsewhere! Most artists are still for tuning around the hands of the clock...without having the slightest concern for the spring hidden in the opaque case. The eye-spring....Arshile Gorky – for me the first painter to whom the secret have been completely revealed.
  - Breton's quote in the *Introduction to the exhibition of Gorky's first show*, Julien Levy Gallery March 1945; as quoted in *Arshile Gorky – Goats on the roof*, ed. by Matthew Spender Ridinghouse, London, 2009, pp. 257-258
- Truly the eye was...made to cast a lineament, a conducting wire between the most heterogeneous things. Such a wire, of maximum ductility should allow us to understand, in a minimum of time, the relationship which connect, without possible discharge of continuity innumerable physical and mental structures...the key (of the mental prison, ed.) lies in a free unlimited pay of analogies...one can admire today a canvas signed by Gorky, 'The liver is the Cock's Comb', which should be considered the great open door to the analogy world.



collective art-work, 1931-32: 'Cadavre exquis', created by André Breton, Paul Elouard, Tristan Tzara, Valentin Hugo



collective art-work, 1938: 'Cadavre exquis', created by André Breton, Jacqueline Lamba, Yves Tanguy

- Quote of Breton, from *Introduction to the exhibition of Gorky's first show*, Julien Levy Gallery, March 1945; as quoted in *Arshile Gorky – Goats on the roof* ed. by Matthew Spender Ridinghouse, London, 2009, p. 258
- In short it is my concern to emphasize that Gorky is, of all the surrealist artists, the only one who maintains direct contact with nature – sit down to paint before her Furthermore, it is out of the question that he would take the expression of this nature as an end in itself – rightly he demands of her that she provide sensations that can serve as springboards for both knowledge and pleasure in fathoming certain profound states of mind...Here for the first time nature is treated as a cryptogram. The artist has a code by reason of his own sensitive anterior impressions, and can decode nature to reveal the very rhythm of life, in the discovery of the very rhythm of life.
- Quote of Breton, from *Introduction to the exhibition of Gorky's first show*, Julien Levy Gallery, March 1945; as quoted in *Arshile Gorky – Goats on the roof* ed. by Matthew Spender Ridinghouse, London, 2009, p. 258
- Art today can only be revolutionary that is, it must aspire at the complete and radical reconstruction of society even if for no other reason than to emancipate intellectual creation from the chains which obstruct it and to allow all mankind to rise to the heights that only geniuses could reach in the past.
- Quote of Breton, from *La Clé des Champs* (1953); as cited by Thomas Molnar, *The Decline of the Intellectual* (1961)
- As we liked to do as children, extracting from the soft forest floor the light chestnut trees only a few centimeters high at the base of which the chestnut continues to shine to the sun its clods of soil from the past, the chestnut conserving all of its presence and witnessing with its presence the power of green hands, of shadows of airy white or pink pyramids of dances....and of future chestnuts which, under new dust, would be discovered by the marveled sight of other children. It is in this perspective that the work of Arp, more than any other, should be situated. He found the most vital in himself in the secrets of this germinating life where the most minimal detail is of the greatest importance where, on the other hand, the distinction between the elements becomes meaningless, adopting a peculiar under the rock humor permanently
- Quote from *Anthologie de l'humour noir* André Breton; as cited in Arp, ed. Serge Fauchereau, Ediciones Poligrafa S. A., Barcelona, Spain, 1988
- Under his [Marc Chagall] sole impulse metaphor made its triumphal entry into modern painting.
- Quote in *Chagall – a biography*, Jackie Wullschlagger, Knopf, Publisher, New York 2008, text from inside-cover
- Divine Dali!
- Quote of Breton, written in the prologue of *The Diary of a Genius* Salvador Dali, London Pan Books, 1976, 1980 p. 35



Plaque commémorative with Breton's quote: 'Je cherche l'or du temps' / I am looking for the gold of time'; Paris, 9ème arrondissement - Comédie de Paris

## Quotes about André Breton



### chronologically arranged, after date of the quotes about Andre Breton

- So, André Breton, if tonight I dream I am screwing you, tomorrow morning I will paint all of our best fucking positions with the greatest wealth of detail.
- Quote of Salvador Dali, c. 1930; as cited by Jonathan Jones in his article 'André in wonderland' *The Guardian / Culture*, 16 June, 2004
- In the early 1930's Dalí was judged by a surrealist 'high court' at André Breton's flat; Dali was accused of 'counter-revolutionary actions'. Dalí claimed that he was being an honest and pure surrealist, recording the unpurgated contents of his psychic life, which this quote should illustrate.
- We lived in New York between 1941 and 1945 in a great friendship, running museums and antiquarians together owe him a lot about the knowledge and appreciation of objects. I've never seen him [Breton] doing a mistake on exotic and unusual objects. When I say a mistake, I mean about its authenticity but also its quality. [Breton] had a sense, almost of divination.
- Quote by Claude Lévi-Strauss in an interview in 1971; as quoted on Wikipedia: André Breton

- the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss spoke about Breton's skill in determining the authenticity of objects and moreover described their friendship while the two were living in New York.

## External links

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-  Encyclopedic article on André Breton at Wikipedia
  -  Media related to André Breton at Wikimedia Commons
  - First Manifesto of Surrealism *The Abridged Dictionary of Surrealism*, reprinted in Marguerite Bonnet, ed. (1988). *Oeuvres complètes* 1:328. Paris: Éditions Gallimard
  - life history in short of André Breton - illustrated by historical images; on YouTube
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